

VALOR AWARDS

**59th Awards Convocation
March 4, 1999**



Valor Awards are presented to Interior employees who have demonstrated unusual courage involving a high degree of personal risk in the face of danger. The act of heroism is not required to be related to official duties or to have occurred at the official duty station.

Jeff Emmett, Eric Loomis, and Paul Rodriquez, of the Bureau of Land Management, rescued a child who was in danger of drowning in Mill Creek, Oregon, putting their own lives in jeopardy. On June 26, 1996, several children wandered off the Loon Lake campground and began playing in Mill Creek, whose waters had been swollen by heavy rains. While playing on rocks, one of the children slipped, fell into the creek, and became caught in the abnormally high current. Emmett, Loomis, and Rodriquez responded to the emergency without regard for their own safety and were able to save the child. (See photo page 1)

burning car and pulled one occupant to safety. She then tried to rescue the other person, who was heavy and unconscious. With the help of Metropolitan Police officers who had arrived at the scene, she was able to pull the second person from the vehicle, moments before it exploded. Abt was later treated for injuries she sustained during the rescue.



Charles W. Mitchem, a National Park Service ranger, responded to a 911 call to assist Hinton City Police in West Virginia with a shooting incident involving a barricaded gunman. Shortly after Mitchem arrived at the scene, the gunman shot a city police officer five times. The officer managed to crawl about 25 yards before collapsing. Ranger Mitchem, who exposed himself to gunfire from the barricaded man, pulled the severely wounded officer to safety. Mitchem remained at the scene and convinced the gunman to surrender without further incident.



Robert M. Danno, the chief ranger at Chiricahua National Monument in Willcox, Arizona, saved three climbers who had become stranded on a steep, 900-foot high cliff in a rugged area of the Coronado National Forest on July 10, 1996. At night, Danno rappelled down an unfamiliar, badly eroded, soft rock face. Only his headlamp provided visibility. He found the first victim in a very hazardous situation and lowered him to where the other two were stranded. Reassuring the distraught victims they weren't going to die, Danno lowered them, one at a time, 600 feet to the base of the cliff. The group then hiked two miles to the road. The rescue took 10 hours and was complicated by unfamiliar terrain, extremely hazardous cliffs, and poor visibility.

Richard A. Sanger, a National Park Service ranger, risked his life rescuing a backpacker who had fallen into a flooded creek in Kings Canyon National Park in California. The backpacker was attempting to cross a creek, fell into the water, and was swept under a log. Ranger Sanger placed himself between the riverbank and a large branch of the log, reached into the freezing water, and freed the backpacker's foot, pulling him to safety. He then stabilized and treated the victim for hypothermia and other injuries.



Brad Robert Benson, a gardener at Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco, California, saved a drowning suicide victim. On July 18, 1996, Benson was informed by a park visitor that a man had jumped off of the Muni Pier at Aquatic Park. It appeared that the man who had jumped was unable to swim and was attempting suicide. Benson ran to the area, found the man floating face down in the bay, and jumped into the freezing water to save the victim. Benson and another rescuer kept the man afloat for 20 minutes until help arrived.

Thomas Padian and Dean Knauer, refuge officers with the Fish and Wildlife Service, were called to help locate a woman threatening suicide. They found her parked on the shore of Lake Darling, near Minot, North Dakota. As the officers tried to remove the woman from her car, she drove toward the lake, jumped from her vehicle, and ran into the water. Officers Knauer and Padian pursued her into the lake where the water temperature was 45 degrees and the wind was blowing at 40 miles per hour. The officers brought the unconscious victim back to shore and the woman was transported to the hospital where she fully recovered.



Thomas Padian receiving the Valor Award from Secretary Babbitt.



Renee Abt accepts her Valor Award from Secretary Babbitt at the March 4th ceremony.

Renee M. Abt, a U.S. Park Police detective, saved two lives by pulling injured passengers from an overturned and burning automobile. On March 22, 1997, while traveling off-duty on the Southeast-Southwest Freeway in Washington, DC, Abt spotted a vehicle that had struck the concrete median, overturned, and caught fire. She quickly reported the accident and stopped to render aid. With flames reaching the vehicle's passenger compartment and two people trapped inside, Abt entered the



Steven L. Drager, an employee of the Denver Service Center, attempted to save a drowning victim in Yosemite National Park in California. On April 12, 1996, Drager was hiking on Mist Trail when he saw a man drowning in the river below the Happy Isle Bridge. The victim had been trapped under a log while trying to save his dog. The animal had fallen into the stream. A bystander had already freed the man from the log snag by the time Drager arrived, but could not get him to shore. Drager entered the raging river, pulled the man out of the water, and immediately performed CPR. Despite his efforts and those of the medics who had arrived, the victim's life could not be saved.

Joseph D. Kolodski and Anthony V. Welch. Ranger Kolodski was the first National Park Service officer to arrive at the scene of an incident along the Blue Ridge Parkway near Cherokee, North Carolina, where a man with a rifle had been threatening visitors. Kolodski, with Great Smoky Mountains National Park, reported by patrol car radio that he had spotted the man and began coordinating plans with other rangers who



Joseph D. Kolodski and Anthony V. Welch were honored for their valor at the March 4, 1999 awards ceremony. Accepting the Valor Award for Officer Kolodski is his widow, Florie Takaki, at right, being consoled by Secretary Babbitt. Officer Welch is at left.

were en route to cordon off the area. When Welch arrived on the scene in another marked cruiser and pulled in behind Kolodski, the gunman fired his high-powered rifle. The bullet pierced Kolodski's body armor and struck him in the chest. When the suspect fired at Welch, the ranger took cover and returned fire. Welch also radioed that Kolodski had been shot, advised other rangers of the situation, and how to approach the scene. Ranger Kolodski died of his wound. The gunman was apprehended by a team of federal and local police officers.



John Marshall Rayfield, a special agent with the Fish and Wildlife Service, saw an aircraft crash into the water at Minto Flats State Waterfowl Area in Alaska on Sept. 29, 1996. The light plane flipped upside down, trapping the pilot in the submerged cockpit. Rayfield rushed to the scene in a boat, entered the 35-degree water, and dove onto the aircraft several times, kicking out the windows and cutting his hands severely in several places while trying to free the unconscious pilot. Unfortunately the pilot died at the crash site; however, Special Agent Rayfield did not abandon his rescue effort until the effects of hypothermia made it impossible for him to continue.

Kinsey R. Shilling, a park ranger at New River Gorge National River in Glen Jean, West Virginia, saved the life of a visitor trapped in the stream. On Oct. 6, 1996, a tandem canoe and kayak with three people plunged over Sandstone Falls. Two of the boaters made it to safety but the third remained trapped on a small boulder in a narrow chute at the base of the falls. During the following nine hours, several rescue attempts failed to reach the victim. Ranger Shilling, in the darkness and without rescue lines, carefully worked his way through the channel of water below the falls and brought the victim back across the current to safety.

Steven J. Battista, a U.S. Park Police Officer, entered a burning building to rescue a resident who had been overcome by smoke. While on patrol in Staten Island, New York, on Nov. 20, 1995, Battista arrived at the scene of a fire. Panicked bystanders told him that someone was still inside the building that was partially engulfed in flames. Battista immediately entered the building, found the person, who was succumbing to smoke inhalation, and led him from the second floor to safety. When the man attempted to reenter the burning building, Battista physically restrained him.



Martin Q. Towery, a National Park Service ranger, saved the life of a swimmer at Ozark National Scenic Riverways in Missouri on July 23, 1996. Towery was boating on the Current River with his family when he saw a man floating on an innertube being swept into a rootwad, where he became entangled and entrapped by the force of the current. As the current pushed the innertube underwater, Towery went into the water and was able to hold the panicked victim's head above the surface while he freed the man. With the aid of other boaters, Towery pulled the man from the water, though his efforts were made more difficult because the victim couldn't understand English, couldn't swim, and had sustained serious injuries that prevented him from helping himself.

Richard Decora and **Vernon Smith**, U.S. Park Police officers who were responding to a fire call, heard someone yelling from inside the burning building as they approached the scene. The house was filled with heavy smoke but the officers were able to locate the resident, an elderly man confined to a wheelchair. They removed the man safely and had him transported to the hospital. The officers then reentered the house and extinguished the fire.



Officers Decora and Smith accept their Valor Awards from Secretary Babbitt.



Jeffrey D. Muller, a U.S. Park Police Officer, rescued an elderly woman from the freezing Anacostia River in Washington, D.C. On Jan. 26, 1997, shortly after midnight, Muller saw a vehicle stopped near the Anacostia Marina. When the driver left his car to speak with Muller, the vehicle rolled down the road, with the driver's wife inside, and plunged over the embankment into the Anacostia River. The temperature was in the low 30s and the water was extremely cold. Unable to reach the woman as the car hung over the embankment, Muller radioed for help. When the vehicle slid into the river and began to sink, Muller entered the frigid river and after several attempts, was able to open the woman's door. He pulled her out of

the submerged car and swam her to the riverbank, where assisting officers were able to pull her to safety.

Thomas L. Howell, a National Park Service ranger, responded to a teenage girl's plea for help. Members of her family were in danger of drowning near the Johnson Beach Facility on Perdido Key, off the gulf coast of Florida. Ranger Howell swam 200 yards beyond the sandbar where he located the sister, gave her the rescue buoy, and convinced her she was well enough to swim back to the sandbar. Howell then swam out another 25 yards to rescue the father who was semi-conscious and struggling badly in the three- to four-foot waves. Howell took the father in tow and kept him afloat until a rescue boat arrived. Everyone was pulled from the water and received immediate medical attention.



Patrick J. Fouty and **Warren C. Boyer**, U.S. Park Police officers at Golden Gate National Recreation Area, California, saved a suicidal man from harming himself, his daughter, and the officers. On June 24, 1996, Fouty responded to a report of a suicidal man who had his two-year old daughter in the car beside him. The man threatened to drive his vehicle off the cliffs of the Marin Headlands, 600 feet above San Francisco Bay. When Fouty approached, the man drove to the edge of the cliff, jumping a log barricade with the vehicle's front tires. Fouty backed his police vehicle away and approached on foot, talking to the man and convincing him to release his daughter. When Boyer arrived, the man locked himself in the vehicle and drove into the log barrier several times, almost clearing the barricade. Boyer then persuaded the driver



Officers Fouty, at left, and Boyer, right, accept their Valor Awards from Secretary Babbitt.

to roll down his window, enabling the officer to dive through the open window, disable the gear shift, and unlock the door. Fouty opened the driver's door and grabbed the distraught man, placing him in protective custody. During the incident, the van's precarious position on the edge of the cliff placed the officers and the driver in grave danger.